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ABSTRACT

Graduate programs in speech communication offer students a variety of assistantships including a forensic assistantship. Among factors affecting assistantships that have not been investigated in past studies, three stand out. The first factor that should be considered is the size of the entire graduate program in the department. The nature of a forensic assistantship often depends on the size of the school. In many cases, the communication graduate program is small and the only graduate students are those directly involved in the forensic program. The second factor is the employment of a graduate student as the director of forensics. Many schools plead a tight budget and use this as an excuse not to fund a director's position and staff it with regular faculty. The third factor that needs attention is found in the priorities of graduate assistants. For various reasons, students often make their assistantship the first priority, at the expense of their academic studies. The system of using graduate students as assistants in the forensic program can be improved, and investigations into how to improve it should continue. (SRT)

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THE FORENSIC ASSISTANTSHIP: ITS ROLE IN THE GRADUATE PROGRAM

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THE FORENSIC ASSISTANTSHIP: ITS ROLE IN THE GRADUATE PROGRAM

Larry G. Schnoor

Graduate assistantships are often valuable positions for students who wish to fund their pursuit of a graduate degree and at the same time gain experience in various aspects of the areas of communication. Numerous degree granting institutions offer assistantships for a variety of reasons, among them being research assistants, teaching assistants, and forensic assistants or any combination which meets the needs of the granting institution. While it would be advantageous to examine the entire spectrum of graduate assistantships in speech communication, during the next few minutes, I shall be dealing only with the forensic assistantship and its role in the graduate program.

My approach is influenced by several factors: (1) my observations of forensic assistantships based on 23 years of experience as a director of forensics; (2) my conversations with other directors of forensics during the past 23 years; (3) my conversations with forensic assistants; and (4) my role as a Chairperson of a Speech Department with a graduate program. I realize that while some of my reactions may be different from several of you in this room, there will be sufficient commonality for all of us to identify with some of the areas explored in the next few minutes.

The extent of the use of graduate assistantships in forensics is not very clear. An examination of the various communication journals revealed that little has been researched regarding forensic assistantships. In 1973, Dr. Ricke researched college forensics in the United States and reported

that of the 467 replies he received, only 17.6 % of the programs indicated that graduate students were hired to assist the director of forensics. He assumed that this was obviously limited to graduate degree granting institutions for the most part. As I know from personal experience, there are now programs existing at institutions without graduate programs that employ forensic assistants that may be attending a graduate school in a near-by location.

In 1983, I conducted a study of forensic budgets of the schools that had attended the 1982 AFA NIET. That study revealed that the use of assistants, whether faculty or graduate students, was indicated by 56 schools (49%) and ranged from one assistant to a maximum of nine. Upon the re-examination of the data for that study, I have discovered that of the 56 schools with assistants, 26 (46%) of the respondents identified that their programs used graduate assistants in the forensic program. This examination also revealed that the number of graduate assistants ranged from one to a maximum of nine, with a salary range from a low of $2,000 for the year to a high of $5,000 a year with free tuition and a housing allowance of $150 per month. It was not clear as to just what was required in the way of duties for these assistants, whether they were coaching assistants only or if they had to teach one, two, or more classes in addition to their forensic responsibilites.

The most recent study, conducted by Jeff Brand and Judy DeBoer was sent to 151 schools. They received a response from 74, with 46 (62%) indicating they used graduate assistants in the forensic program. It seems to be very clear that the use of graduate assistants has increased substantially since Ricke's study in 1973.

As far as can be determined, none of these research projects revealed a number of factors that should be investigated in order to fully understand the role of the forensic assistant in graduate program. I have limited my coverage of these factors to the three that I feel are basic and relate to most programs that make use of forensic assistants.

One of the first factors that should be considered is the size of the entire graduate program in the department. In many cases that I have observed, the graduate program is very small, in fact, in some cases, the only graduate students are those directly involved in the forensic program. This is probably the case in more institutions then we would like to believe. We faced this situation at my institution several years ago. While we were undergoing our departments review, the outside consultants asked us what the critical mass was for our graduate program and directed us to consider whether or not we were doing our graduate students a service. At that time we had only three full-time, on campus graduate students and all three were involved with the forensic program. The consultants were concerned with the point that without a larger number of graduate students to interact with, did we have our graduate program for the purpose of educating future scholars and practicioners of communication or was our program really designed just to provide assistants for the forensic program? Since that time we have enlarged our graduate program so that today we have twelve graduate assistants in the department, only three of which are involved with forensics, and another four full-time graduate students in communication on campus. The issue is really related to the element of service. Does the graduate program -the forensic assistantship - exist for the purpose of providing help for the

forensic program or does it exist as a viable graduate program, allowing sufficient interaction between students with a variety of interests in the field of communication?

A second factor that deserves attention is the use of the graduate forensic assistantship as the director of forensics. There are a number of institutions that do not have a regular staff member appointed as the director of forensics and give this position to a graduate student. As we all know, there are a number of graduate students that are very capable of handling such an appointment, and have been very successful in doing so. That is not the issue. The real issue is whether or not this is the best for the forensics program itself. With a graduate assistant filling the role of directing the forensic program, the program is under new leadership every two years. In addition, little can be done to develop long range growth plans for the program and numerous other problems may exist regarding budget development as well as relationships between the students on the forensic team and the rest of the staff of the department. Granted, the only way a forensic program may exist at a number of schools, because of monetary problems, may be for the program to be directed by a graduate assistant. However, I firmly believe that many schools use this means as an excuse not to fund a director's position and staff it with regular faculty. This could be due to the lack of support of the forensic program by the staff of the entire department, or the institution.

A third factor that deserves attention is related to the question of priorities. All of us that are involved with forensic programs that make use of graduate assistants need to address this issue. What should be the first priority of the forensic assistant? I am afraid that in many cases,

the answer to that question would be the forensic program. Yet, the assistant is in graduate school working on an advanced degree and I would hope that the first priority would be the assistants academic course work. The fact that it may not be, could be due to pressure by directors of forensic programs to produce winning teams or to lessen their own work load. Another could be self-enduced pressure by the graduate assistants. Feeling the need to prove themselves as successful coaches, or not recognizing that they are no longer competing themselves, many graduate assistants give their most energy and time to the forensic program rather than the academic courses they are taking. I am sure each of us in this room could cite cases of graduate students that have served as forensic assistants, finished their elibility for having an assistantship, and may even finish their course work, but have not finished the requirements for the degree and in some cases, may never do so. As a department chair and as a director of a forensic program, I have to be careful that I do not contribute to this problem. The question of priority is clearly one that needs to addressed by everyone involved in forensic programs.

I do not want to give the impression that I feel everything related to the role of the forensic assistantship is negative. That is not case. As I think about the past 23 years, as I think about the people that I have worked with in my own program as well as those that have worked in other programs, I realize that the forensic assistantship has allowed a number of students to gain invaluable experience and to go on to become very successful coaches of their own programs and to make valuable contributions to the field of speech communication. This will continue, but at the same time, we must be aware that the system of using graduate students as assistants in the forensic program can be improved and that

we must and should continue to investigate how best to make those improvements.